Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church

Edited by
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The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy
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Introduction

Reforming the Catholic Church beyond Vatican II

STAF HELLEMANS & PETER JONKERS

In the last decades, the Catholic Church in Western societies has changed beyond recognition. It is no longer a powerful ‘encompassing institution’, keeping watch over a ‘faithful flock’, but has become a contested minority institution in a turbulent and competitive field. This means that the Catholic Church has to cater to a public since people know that they can always turn away when they lose interest – and this also holds for those who are heavily committed, such as youngsters joining new ecclesial movements or even the priesthood. In this radically new context, at least three fundamental questions crop up: 1) How can the Catholic Church mediate Christ as the ‘light of the nations’ (‘Lumen Gentium’) to today’s world? 2) What (new) orientations can theology and theologians offer in this respect? 3) How can the internal organization of the Church be put to good use, so that it can respond constructively to this new context? These three questions define the contents of this book and its arrangement. Given that the situation of the Church in Western societies differs substantially from that in the non-Western world, and given that the cultural and religious background of the contributors to this volume is a Western one, these questions will be answered mainly from the perspective of the Church in the West.

That the Church in the West is confronted with a radically new reality is the baseline of this book. It is reflected in two derived considerations. First, though it is legitimate to use the label ‘seekers’ to identify an important religious attitude of today’s people inside as well as outside the churches, one has to keep in mind that the non-active seekers and the religiously indifferent constitute the overall majority of the population in many Western countries, and their share is still growing. The spiritual foundation on which the Catholic Church can build its religious offer is, hence, much shakier than many theologians and church leaders think. This

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1 The editors wish to thank Erik Buster for his assistance in editing this volume.
2 Throughout the book, ‘church’ written in lowercase will refer to a church or churches in general; ‘Church’ in uppercase will typically, but with a few exceptions refer to the Roman Catholic Church. Word groups with church, such as church leadership, will always be written in lowercase.
means that a popular view to envision the future of the Church, namely, that the great religions would be able to inspire most people to make the transition from their vague religious and spiritual experiences towards faith in vertical transcendence and to transform their lives accordingly, is overly optimistic, at least as far as Europe is concerned. The societal context in which the Church has to develop and promote its views and religious offer has become far less receptive to its message. Moreover, the religious field is pluralizing and is also dissolving into a wider sphere of well-being, happiness, and consumption. When people define themselves as ‘religious or spiritual’, they typically refer to an ever-widening sphere of interest in which Christian faith only plays a minor role. This sphere ranges from traditional Christian and non-Christian religions (e.g., Zen-meditation) to so-called new religions and spiritualities, such as yoga, New Age, neo-paganism, fiction-based religion, and to psycho-therapeutic techniques, wellness centers, music festivals, etc.

Second, and moving to Catholicism proper, most theologians and church leaders still consider the spiritual and intellectual legacy of Vatican II as paradigmatic when it comes to understanding the relations between Church and society in our times. Yet, while Vatican II indeed brought about a major change in the relation of the Church towards the world, marking the start of a fundamentally positive attitude towards contemporary society, the latter, for its part, appears to be less and less interested in the message of the Church. This evolution has been so pervasive that leading social scientists speak of an ‘exculturation’ of Christian faith, especially in Western Europe. Yet, as Danièle Hervieu-Léger also remarked, the end of one specific form of Catholicism does not mean *ipso facto* the end of Catholicism as such. What the societal developments show in all clarity is the urgent need for the Church to find new ways to make its voice heard in the world of today. This is why we asked the theological contributors to this volume

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not to look backwards to Vatican II and its implementation but, rather, to look forward, in particular to analyze some important post-Vatican developments in the Church and the world, and to explore new ideas to engage with them. The Catholic Church only has a future if it finds new ways to relate to the world, no longer from a privileged majority position from which a whole world is led – even if this Catholic world proved to be a subculture – but as a minority group that can only reach people tentatively, with an inspiring offer that can nevertheless be rejected. Furthermore, we – as authors – have to avoid ‘ought’-perspectives that remain in the abstract, i.e., perspectives that one-sidedly emphasize either the shortcomings of the present in comparison to the past (‘the golden past fallacy’) or the fertile lands of the future that lie ahead if a particular church policy were to be implemented (‘the golden future fallacy’). Instead, we need to start from the challenges with which the Church is currently confronted and ask ourselves which feasible paths the Church could take, so that it can continue to unlock the promising prospect of God’s eternal bliss to the world.

Mediating the Christian message

The leading question of the first part of this volume is to find new ways for the Church to mediate Christ as ‘lumen gentium’ in today’s secular society. According to the dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium, the mission of the Church is to bring the light of Christ to all people. At the time of the Council, most faithful and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were convinced that the Church, in fulfilling this mediating role, could count on a congenial society, which would welcome the message of the Church and even accept the Church as a prime actor in society. However, in today’s secular society, most people tend to ignore the light of Christ, and certainly do not perceive the Church as the instrument to spread this light over the nations. So, the congenial relationship between Church and society has been broken and has become a contingent one. On the collective

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8 The disjunction between Church and world constituted the basic perspective of the project of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, directed by George McLean, Jose Casanova and George Taylor. The project engaged between 2010 and 2016 scholars from all over the Western world, working in about 20 teams. See the initiating volume Taylor, Casanova, and McLean (eds.), Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age, and the concluding volume Charles Taylor, José Casanova, Georg F. McLean, and João J. Vila-Chã (eds.), Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue & Kenotic Vision
level, it has become more difficult both to identify the actors – in the
church and in society – who have to perform the mediation as well as the
ways in which the mediation can and should be performed. On the individ-
ual level, the broken relationship between Church and world is even more
obvious, as the latter’s alienation from the Church and its hierarchy is
widespread.

Since the role of the Church as mediator between Christ and the world
has become more complicated and fragile, the question is how this media-
tion can be performed under the current circumstances. In the first part of
this book, three perspectives on how the Church can mediate Christian
faith with the contemporary world are spelled out: the interpretation of
Christian faith as an exemplification of individual fulfillment without
yielding to the temptation of individualism (Halik); the presentation to the
public of a fitting and enticing religious offer (Hellemans); and the revalu-
atation of Christian wisdom as a response to the general need for life-orient-
tation (Jonkers). The question of the mediation between ordinary Catho-
lics and the church hierarchy reappears in almost every chapter of this
book, most clearly in the call to enhance the participation and impact of
the laity in the Church. Nick Healey, for example, pleads for the incor-
poration of the ‘theology of the ordinary faithful’, including the distant
Catholics, into the life of the Church, next to institutional and academic
theology; Matthias Sellmann stresses the importance of stronger partici-
patory structures of decision-making and involvement; Massimo Faggioli
sees the Church as a ‘communio fidelium’ that finds its first expression in
the ‘communio ecclesiarum’.

But let us return to the chapters of the first part. In our individualized
society where people are, almost instinctively, suspicious of institutional
claims of subservience and obedience, the Catholic Church must prove
that following Christ brings one nearer to the fullness of life, in particular
of one’s personal life. In practice, people, irrespective of their traditional-
ist or liberal views, are already following their particular paths. Today,
leading a religious life has become an individual life project, i.e., express-
ing (inadvertently) the trends towards individualization in society. How-
ever, living religiously also means be willing to (partially) overcome the
individualistic and self-centered consequences of this societal trend.
Czech sociologist and theologian Tomas Halik (Charles University,
Prague) takes on this tension. He shows how faith as a personal response
to God’s call has always, i.e., from the beginning and throughout history,
constituted the very heart of and driving force behind Judaism and

(Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), in
particular the chapters by McLean and Taylor.
Christianity. This is exemplified by the option of the Hebrew prophets for the poor and the struggle for social justice over the temple cult, in Paul’s opposition against the religion of the Law, in the fact that monks, saints, mystics, and heretics were offering alternatives to imperial Christianity, in the opposition of the Protestants against the vagueness of a general religiosity, in Kierkegaard’s existential interpretation of faith, and in the welcoming of secularization by some theologians and philosophers as a preparatory step for a kenotic Christianity. They all demonstrate that religious life as an individual life project cannot be regarded solely as the result of the individualism of modernity, but rather as the outcome of the tension between individual ‘faith’ and collective ‘religion’ in the history of Christianity. It has thus to be welcomed as a positive force. At the same time, the examples of Christian social thought, the presence of God in interpersonal relations, the solidarity with the spiritually and socially abandoned, and the idea of an ‘open church’ also show that Christianity has always stressed that the individualizing force of ‘faith’ is not to be interpreted in an individualistic way since Christian faith also encompasses the other; in particular, it means solidarity with and empathy for the marginalized. Of special interest in this context are the attempts of the Church to accompany the religious seekers in a spirit of dialogue, mutual respect, and enrichment. Halik thus maintains that Christianity has always been sensitive to individual cravings for the Holy. He concludes that the contemporary search for individual fulfillment is at the heart of Christianity; yet what is also needed is a renewal of spirituality, emerging from charismatic figures and small communities in the forging of the modern critique of religion.

However, when the Church states that a person, by living religiously, leads a more fulfilled life, it needs convincing exemplars and pathways to which it can refer when communicating with the wider public. In order for such statements to be effective, the connection between Christianity and individual fulfillment has to be translated into an offer that is in principle attractive to contemporary society at large. Religious virtuosos may carve out their own, singular Christian path towards fulfillment, but ordinary people need an appealing offer within reach. And here arises, according to Belgian sociologist of religion Staf Hellemans (Tilburg University), a major problem. Between 1800 and 1960, the Catholic Church had an extensive offer for the ordinary faithful: sacraments and sacramentals, processions and pilgrimages, daily prayers, devotional sodalities, religious feasts marking the calendar, religious education, health care and, last but not least, social and cultural organizations of all kinds. Most of this has disappeared by now or still exists in a more church-independent way (e.g., health care or youth organizations). Where the old offer is still present and
church-near, it is appealing only to a smaller section of the population. A new offer has come to replace the old one, yet in less extensive and less appealing ways. The dearth of the existing offer in many places and the inability to present an equally appealing new one goes a long way in explaining the decline of the Catholic Church in the West since about 1960. Consequently, its relevance as mediator of the Holy is at stake.

If the Catholic Church wants to avoid further and enduring institutional decline in the future, it will have to devise an appealing and fitting new and renewed religious offer. Its elaboration and spread need far more deliberate attention and effort than what the Church – especially its hierarchy – has been investing in so far. Moreover, the renewal of the religious offer is not a one-off initiative but requires a continuous updating of its contents and a re-committing of those involved. In order to realize this, it is necessary to establish institutional provisions on the higher levels of the Church (diocese, province, and world church). Pastoral centers at these various levels should take stock of the existing initiatives and evaluate them, devise new initiatives and, if these prove to be successful, disseminate them. A further requirement for a successful renewal of the religious offer is the inversion of the relationship between clergy and lay faithful: the clergy should perceive itself as being in the service of the lay people, not the other way around. Among other things, this implies that the Church accepts that people pick and choose from the religious offer what they find most appealing, while leaving other, less appealing elements aside. In this respect, insisting on orthodoxy and on a total embrace of Catholic doctrine seems counterproductive. Hence, it is advisable not to distinguish sharply between the Catholic in-crowd and the outsiders, but to reach out to society at large since the dividing lines between these two categories have become more blurred. Finally, one has to keep in mind that the renewal of the Church’s offer does not at all mean a narrowing down to one type of activity. Rather, all sorts of initiatives, conservative and liberal, demanding and undemanding, for the religiously lukewarm as well as for the virtuosi are needed and should be welcomed.

Closely related to the availability of a fitting religious offer is the question of how the Church can mediate its interpretation of the Holy to society at large. Traditionally, and in particular in the heyday of ultramontane mass Catholicism, doctrinal and moral principles were seen to

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9 This kind of Catholicism predominated in Europe after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era until the first half of the twentieth century. It was a staunchly conservative Catholicism yet steeped in modernity. It can be qualified as ultramontane since Catholics did not consider the local or national authorities as their real leaders but, rather, the Pope, who lived in Rome (‘beyond the Alps’).
constitute the essence of Christian faith. The local clergy in the parishes elaborated this doctrinal and moral framework further into a wide-ranging gamma of detailed prescriptions as day-to-day guidelines for a Catholic life. However, in our times of expressive individualism, many people perceive these principles and prescriptions as rather abstract, not resonating at all in their inner selves, so that these principles are at odds with people’s view of what it concretely takes to lead a truly fulfilling life. This is why many aspects of Christian doctrine have lost their relevance in our times, especially for the religiously marginal and secular. Yet, in these times of radical pluralism, all people, irrespective of whether they are religious or not, are in need of a truthful orientation in life and, consequently, are interested in how Christian faith puts this into practice. What they are asking for is not so much a load of prescriptions, but rather advice and guidance for finding their individual way to live the Gospel authentically. This points again to the need of translating and even re-focusing institutional theology in order to respond to people’s cravings. According to Dutch philosopher Peter Jonkers (Tilburg University), Christian wisdom as a life-orientating tradition and activity is an example of such a re-focusing. As is commonly known, wisdom has always been part and parcel of the Christian tradition: one only needs to think of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, the sayings of Jesus and the life stories of people who follow his example, or the wisdom embedded in pastoral counseling in our times. Two questions can be asked in this respect: Where shall (true) wisdom be found and how can it be distinguished from seeming wisdom? How can the transition from Christian wisdom to the concrete reality of religious people be made in practice?

In reply to the first question, Jonkers states that characteristic of Christian wisdom is that it is God-centered, has the whole of creation as its context, is immersed in history and the contemporary world, and is constantly sought afresh with others in a community whose basic trust is that the Spirit will lead them into further truth. Since Christians believe that Jesus is God’s only son, they believe that he is not only a teacher of divine wisdom but is to be regarded also as wisdom incarnate. Hence, Christian wisdom not only consists in letting one’s life be oriented by

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It was a mass Catholicism since the Church turned itself, during the nineteenth century, into a highly centralized mass organization, independent of the state, and capable of integrating and mobilizing its flock. See Staf Hellemans, “Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West,” in Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity. Transformations, Visions, Tensions, Staf Hellemans and Jozef Wissink (eds.) (Vienna: Lit-Verlag, 2012), in particular pp. 21-23.
Jesus’ example, but also in believing that the final end of life is a life in Christ. In reply to the second, practical question, (Christian) wisdom involves the capacity for discerning the right rule in difficult situations requiring action. The exercise of this virtue is inseparable from the personal quality of the wise human being. The need for practical wisdom arises when the universalism that is claimed by moral principles is confronted with the recognition of the positive values belonging to the (particular) historical and communitarian contexts in which these same rules have to be realized. This means that the practical competence of (Christian) wisdom is fragile, always open to reconsideration. Furthermore, it can never propose, let alone impose, one single response to people’s quest for a truthful life orientation. According to Jonkers, Catholic social teaching is an exemplar of these two aspects of Christian wisdom since it aims at actualizing the fundamental (Christian) value of justice in the lives of societies here and now, not so much by opting for a uniform top down model but, rather, for a dialogue with those who take the Church’s moral guidelines to heart and look for ways to put them into practice in diverging societal contexts.

Theologizing the New Realities

The second part of the book addresses theology. As already noted above, Vatican II was surely a landmark for the Church and it remains an indispensable reference point. Nevertheless, Church and society have changed so dramatically since the end of Vatican II that theology needs to explore new avenues as to how the Church can fulfill its mediating role in today’s world. We have asked the contributors to address three major challenges, and their responses take theology definitely beyond Vatican II: 1) the challenge that is posed by the rise of internal pluralism within the Church (Murray); 2) the challenge of the globalization of Christianity and its meaning for re-imagining the content of the Christian faith (Rahner); 3) the challenge of finding a new place and dynamics for theology in a church, in which the hierarchy (from the level of the local clergy up to the Pope) is regarded with less deference, the prestige of refined theological argumentation has lowered, and the laity has become more self-confident and, in part, dissenting (Healy).

These are, essentially, new topics. Internal pluralism, in the last two centuries, always caused unease. It was seen as an evil or, at least, as a temporary condition that would eventually be superseded in an encompassing unity, conceived along the lines of Saint Paul’s image of Christ’s body. Because this way of dealing with internal pluralism was still paradigmatic until the 1960s, there was no need for the Council to discuss
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its more radical manifestations. Since then, it has become apparent that increased internal pluralism is here to stay. One of the characteristics of late modernity is that it enhances various kinds of pluralism, including in the life of the Church. Furthermore, the (internal) pluralism of the Church is a heterogeneous reality, and its elements cannot be lumped together into a sort of ‘pre-established harmony’ view. Differences and clashes between opposing positions are frequent, for example, on access to priesthood, moral issues, and interpretations of dogma. Moreover, the challenges linked with the plea for liturgical pluralism differ from those surrounding doctrinal or moral pluralism, and these two are quite distinct from the thorny questions concerning pluralism of the church organization.

Second, and in close connection with the previous point, the Church has to deal with the challenges of globalization. These were discussed at the Second Vatican Council since, already in those days, there was a growing awareness that the world was becoming one, and that positive or negative developments in one part of the world had a major impact on other parts. However, the way to address the challenge of globalization has since changed. The optimistic overtones are gone because what was the leading narrative of globalization then eventually turned out to be too Euro- and Western-centric, thus oppressing alternative narratives.

Finally, the role of theology has changed beyond recognition after the Vatican Council by which time the limits of Neo-Thomist theology, which used to form the backbone of the study programs of seminaries around the world, had become clear: it was incompatible with the more biblically and hermeneutically inspired type of theology that came into vogue in the 1960s and has remained since. Theology also pluralized and became more critical of magisterial teachings. In a similar vein, the organization of the training of the clergy underwent a major change: it moved (also physically) from the walled premises of seminaries and study houses of religious orders and congregations to the ivory towers of the academy; the study of theology was not reserved anymore to (male) seminarians, but was opened to lay people, including women. Directly or indirectly, these changes in the content and organization of theological education have had an enormous impact on the place and role of theology in the Church.

With regard to the first question, in a time of growing pluralism inside the Catholic Church and of the globalization of Christianity, it is imperative, beyond the issues of ecumenism and of external religious pluralism,

to develop a theology of internal religious pluralism, thereby taking the sensitivities of non-Western Catholic communities seriously and integrating the insights of non-Western theologians. Can a frame of reference be elaborated that can orient liberals and conservatives to remain on speaking terms with each other and to move forward in and with the Church?

Taking catholicity as his central concept, English systematic theologian Paul D. Murray (Durham University) presents such a frame. In the last decades, and in particular from an ecumenical perspective, catholicity has become a popular concept to reflect on the greater ecclesial setting in which all the Christian churches are embedded – starting from ‘the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church’ in the creed. Murray, who is well versed in ecumenical theology (cf. his ‘receptive ecumenism’), applies catholicity here as a central resource to develop a systematic theology of intra-Catholic diversity, of pluralism within the Roman Catholic Church. He unfolds his ideas in five sections. In the first section, the *pièce de résistance*, he explains the concept of catholicity: how it demands a combination of universality and plurality, of identity and contextual specificity. Catholicity derives from the Greek ‘kath’holou’, ‘according to the whole’. It was already used in the early Church and has two interconnected layers of meaning: the universal character and mission of the Church and its being rooted in the fullness of God, in particular in Christ as the universal particular and in the Spirit. Murray stresses that the spatio-temporal dimension of catholicity should not be interpreted as uniformity imposed from above by a church institution, but as embodying both universality and particularity. Like creation is from the outset plural, so is the Church. And this plurality not only incorporates the many local cultures and local churches, it also reaches much deeper, right into the unique ‘inscape’ (Gerard Manley Hopkins) or ‘haecceitas’ (Duns Scotus) of each particular thing and of each individual human being. Thomas Merton is cited here approvingly: "Therefore each particular being in its individuality...gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now." Murray concludes that the recognition of this far deeper plurality-in-unity – the total gathering of each and every one of these particulars in communion – should be the starting point for thinking and living internal pluralism within the Church.

In the other four sections, Murray explains what it takes to realize and live this idea of plural catholicity in practice. In the second section, he discusses Johann Adam Möhler’s seminal *Unity in the Church* (1825), from which basic principles for dealing with diversity are derived, such as that proper Catholic unity should be regarded as dynamic and inclusive and that dissonant voices are to be approached as containing possibly partial truths. In the third section, taking gay people in the Church as ex-
ample, the costs for dissenting voices in the Church – their compromised recognition as persons in official teaching and in churchly reality – are considered, resulting, in the fourth section, in recommendations for how the Church might become more fully Catholic (e.g., integrating all relevant parties into the deliberative decision making; taking time for learning and avoiding rushing into ‘definitive’ teachings; viewing dissent as normal and useful). Finally, living catholicity differently also demands a corresponding ethic for each church member, the heart of which is the virtue of active patience, in consonance with the self-giving of God. Yet, whether this is an acceptable sacrifice for those suffering is an issue only they can decide.

Looking back, it appears to us that Murray is advocating here the same, positive strategy for dealing with intra-ecclesial diversity as he has already proposed with regard to the diversity between Christian churches. Just as his idea of receptive ecumenism\textsuperscript{11} wants to turn the diversity of churches into an opportunity – let’s not condemn them, but learn from them – his view on catholicity likewise aims to approach internal pluralism within the Church not as a danger to be eradicated, but as an open space that might help the Church to grow further into the plenitude of communion with God and, along the way, allow it also to remain relevant in today’s world.

The second challenge – the need for a less Eurocentric theology – has found a strong advocate in Pope Francis. In \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, he argues:

\begin{quote}
[W]e would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. […] Hence in the evangelization of new cultures, or cultures which have not received the Christian message, it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or ancient it may be, together with the Gospel. The message that we proclaim always has a certain cultural dress, but we in the Church can sometimes fall into a needless hallowing of our own culture, and thus show more fanaticism than true evangelizing zeal.\textsuperscript{12} [Instead], the ultimate aim should be that the
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{12} Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium} (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), No. 117.
Gospel, as preached in categories proper to each culture, will create a new synthesis with that particular culture. Thus, the time seems ripe now to actually develop a broader theology.

German dogmatic theologian Johanna Rahner (Tübingen University), who takes up this challenge, states that in order to incorporate the change of perspective that is required by the very idea of a world church, the Church has to listen to some specific signs of the times, namely, those given by the non-Western churches. This acknowledgment implies that the Church has to accept the idea of an inner plurality of Catholicism. It is crucial that the Church incorporates this idea in its own ecclesiology, which, among other things, implies making it less Eurocentric, not only in theory, but also in practice. Pope Francis takes this challenge seriously by promoting a ‘subsidiary’ form of the office of the unity of the universal church, thus recognizing the importance of the periphery, and the necessity of pluralization, contextualization, and inculturation of what is Catholic. Yet, accepting internal pluralism is not only a matter of changing organizational structures, but requires also, and more importantly, an openness for different currents of thought, and, hence, of theology.

It goes without saying that accepting the challenge of internal pluralism and a less Eurocentric theology poses a number of new challenges for the Church. Nowadays, religious identities are construed from a mixture of sociological, political, and secondary religious points of difference, not from theological criteria. The consequence is that it is difficult to legitimize these criteria for internal pluralism, including theologies from non-Western shapes of Catholicism. Another challenge is finding the right balance between globalization and inculturation. As globalization refers primarily to the universalization of the Western cultural paradigm, the question is whether non-Western cultures and theologies are able to counterbalance this powerful trend; if not, globalization will eventually result in a homogenization or at least hybridization of non-Western theologies under a Western flag. A final challenge is the temptation of subjecting religion to a market strategy, which consists in accentuating the differences between the different (Christian) churches rather than pointing to their common ground in Christ. This can, indeed, result in specific non-Western theologies, but at the cost of unity in the Catholic Church.

Finally, Rahner defines some new tasks and chances for the Church. She urges the Church to go beyond its self-styling as a homogeneous unity and to conceive Catholicity rather as a project aimed at an inclusion of

13 Ibid., No. 127
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diversity. Second, she urges the Church to accept its ‘placelessness’, namely, a life in a permanent foreign land, an existence in exile, which corresponds to God’s place in the world. Finally, as to the topic of a non-or less Eurocentric theology, the question arises of what can or should be preserved of Europe’s rich theological heritage. For Rahner, one of the most important European theological ‘heirlooms’ that can legitimately claim universality is the ideal of the compatibility of faith and reason. Yet, just like with other essential aspects of the European theological heritage, this should not be thought of as a justification for hegemony over non-Western countries, but rather as a permanent task.

A third and final challenge for a theology beyond Vatican II is to re-define the place and significance of theology itself. At least in the heydays of Neo-Thomism, an institutionally dominated type of theology was at the center of Christian faith. It gave a theoretical underpinning to the doctrine of the Church, determined the practice/the life of the faithful, and defined the relation of the Church with the world. In particular, the papal magisterium emerged in the nineteenth century as the most decisive actor in the field and kept this role during a major part of the twentieth century, as is apparent from the number of encyclicals that were published in this period. Seminary and university theology were no less active, but their role was a subservient one, offering intellectual support to the magisterial teaching under whose close supervision they stood. This situation reflects the strengthening of the authority of the church hierarchy in those days. Tellingly, secular ideologies played a similar pivotal role in the theoretical underpinning of the life of the members in some political parties and organizations, the crucial role of party ideology and ideologues in communism being a case in point.

Although the priority of church theology over individual faith has always been a subject of fierce debate, it is nevertheless clear that, today, the trend is going in the opposite direction. This has to do with the typically postmodern aversion against all-encompassing theoretical underpinnings, whether religious or secular. If people are interested at all in the Christian faith, it is not for its refined theology; rather, it is because of the inspiration they find in biblical narratives, in the lives of outstanding religious individuals (officially canonized or not), in the mysterious contact with God that the sacraments and religious music arouse; in sum, in all kinds of experiences that go beyond theological conceptualization and justification. For many people, theology is only of interest if it helps them to understand the inspirational power of these experiences. This evolution can be illustrated by the fact that the elementary knowledge of the doctrine of the Church, even among committed faithful, is evaporating. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that theologians reflect on the
changing role of theology in the whole of the religious enterprise and in the Catholic Church in particular. How can theology change itself in order to prevent (further) isolation, to avoid remaining only a matter of the magisterium and professional theologians operating from behind the safe walls of the Vatican and the universities? In other words, one of the main challenges of theology today is to devise ways in order to integrate the doctrinal and moral insights of ordinary faithful into the teaching of the Church.

American ecclesiologist Nicholas M. Healy (St. John’s University, New York) analyzes these changes starting from the idea that theology is performed in new and multiple ways. In particular, lay theology is new and it is both necessary and beneficial for the life of the Church and its mission to the world. To further develop the importance lay theology might have, Healy focusses on the place and contribution of what he calls ‘New Catholics’, people who regard themselves as Catholics but have an affective, cognitive, and/or practical critical distance from the church leadership’s teaching because they judge that it has been confused and erroneous at times in the past. Therefore, they think they cannot in good conscience simply believe the leadership’s teachings and follow its moral rules unquestioningly, but have to discern a response that seems right, at least for them and who they are and what they have experienced as a particular person or family.

In order to make room for lay theology, Healy pleads for redrawing the theological map as a three-dimensional space. There is, first, ‘institutional theology’, practiced by a few members of the church leadership, and enacted within a clerical-pastoral setting and set forth in institutional documents (conciliar statements and papal encyclicals). Second, there is ‘academic theology’, usually practiced by professionals who teach in universities and similar institutions, but whose influence within the Church is usually indirect. And third, there is ‘ordinary theology’, practiced by all Christians, sometimes alone, perhaps in prayer or reflection, or in the midst of everyday realities when a situation calls for a decision, or in discussions with family members or friends. Typically, and this is predominantly so for the New Catholics, they reflect before accepting, rejecting, or modifying a church teaching that seems problematic. This reflective character means that ordinary theology can and should be qualified as theology. Obviously, it may be confused, self-serving, or wrong from times to time, but so is institutional and academic theology.

Healy considers the theological contributions of the ‘New Catholics’ as a gift for the Church since they have sometimes discerned and avoided the mistakes of institutional theology (e.g., its tendency to reduce the lay form of the Christian life to little more than following a moral code and
adhering to a belief system), as well as those of academic theology (e.g., its tendency to reduce theology to a purely theoretical affair). Yet, institutional theology remains essential because an authoritative leadership is necessary in order to present the Church’s teaching as sufficiently settled, reliable, and livable to form the basis for the faith and practice of all Catholics. Yet, at the same time, the authority of institutional theology is limited since it does not need to claim that its teaching is always and necessarily good and true. This implies that other theological practices – the academic and ordinary theologies – have an authority of their own, though only a ‘local’ one, as distinct from the church leadership’s universal (‘catholic’) authority. Hence, they are authorized to dissent when a particular teaching of the leadership is regarded as mistaken or misleading. In sum, through his analysis of New Catholics and their ordinary theology, Healy underscores, from a different theological starting point than Murray, not only the legitimacy but even the necessity of internal pluralism within the Church. He places this pluralism in an overall pneumatological framework: the Spirit is leading the Church through a pneumatological tension that structures and guides the Church’s life and mission.

Reforming the Catholic Church beyond Vatican II

Besides the above-mentioned dramatic changes in the relation between Church and (secular) society and in the nature of theology, the internal organization of the Catholic Church and its way of operating are also changing very rapidly: in most Western countries, the number of priests is dwindling, parishes are restructuring because of the lack of priests and faithful, while at the same time new movements and events (e.g., World Youth Days, papal visits) are on the rise, religious orders and congregations are needing to reconsider their place in the Church and society, there is a lot of talk about the urge to reform the Curia, etc. It is important to acknowledge that the whole Church, and not only the Vatican or the official Church at the local level, is involved in a process of profound change. Hence, reform of the Church is again on the agenda, in particular since the election of Pope Francis. However, it is not at all clear which direction(s) this reform will take.

Obviously, it is impossible to give a more or less complete overview of these changes in the Church, even if only changes in the developments since the beginning of this century and changes to the Church in the West were covered. It is even hard to discover a common trend in these changes since their nature and local settings differ so much. Furthermore, there is a lack of distance that is imperative in order to sketch these changes in some broad outlines. Therefore, the final part of this book proceeds
pragmatically, that is by presenting three different case-studies of change in the Church on three different levels. The first one is situated on a local level, examining what it takes to change the traditional, stable structure of territorial parishes into a local church as an array of initiatives (Sellmann). The second case-study deals with the completely new mindset and organizational structures that are needed to run a multicultural world church (Faggioli). The third case-study explores how religious orders and congregations are responding to the existential question of their need to reinvent themselves while remaining loyal to the ideals of their congregations (Radcliffe). The aim of this part is that, together, these case-studies give an idea of the complexity of these changes and the challenges they present for everyone involved in the Church, from the ordinary faithful to the church leadership.

The first profound change – with which all church members are confronted in their religious life – is their local parish. Once the basis of the whole church pyramid, the parish is now under considerable strain and change. The horizontal, territorial network of local parishes is making way for a conglomerate of diverse initiatives, carried by diverse agents (regional parishes, local lay groups, regional groups of ecclesial movements, diocesan initiative, etc.). Moreover, the laity is better educated and less submissive. All these developments raise the urgent question: What will the landscape of local churches look like in the near future? German pastoral theologian Matthias Sellmann (Bochum University) takes these profound changes as the starting point of his contribution. He examines the contours of a future-proof local church from an empirical and hermeneutical perspective by examining, among other things, the pastoral plans of local churches. Their capacity for change turns out to be very limited. Yet, change, based on an exchange with today’s secular liberal societies, is urgently needed. This means, first of all, that the Church should not perceive secularity as a threat but, rather, as an opportunity to communicate its own convictions in such a way that they can be understood by today’s people. The predominance of people’s free religious self-determination especially requires major infrastructural changes from the local church as to its spatial organization, creative reception, participation, professionalism, and communication.

The intended result is a future-proof parish, operating as a thematic network, in which ecclesiastical and secular actors together forge temporary alliances in order to offer an attractive, diverse ensemble of religious practical and social forms. The underlying spatial concept here is not so much territorial as it is ‘occasional’, which means that communal utilization of space rather than pastoral spatial control or spatial care is the objective. The model requires further that a diversity of personal inter-
pretations of the Catholic tradition is not only tolerated on a parish level, but also promoted and strategically utilized. A third requirement is the promotion of participatory structures of decision-making and involvement because they are not only the litmus test for social acceptability of secular organizations, but also of religious ones. A fourth one is to develop a new kind of professional leadership that is able to make the change from ‘power’ to ‘authority’, and to support the change of the churches from ‘self-sufficient’ institutions to ‘customer-oriented’ organizations, without giving up their fundamental loyalty to their origins. Fifth, as providers of infrastructures for religious self-determination, religious organizations have to communicate in ways that are characterized by comprehensibility, truth, correctness, and authenticity. Sixth, local churches have to articulate their religious offer in a way that is attractive and inspiring. What is at stake here is not just that people wish to be religious, but also how they want to be religious, which means that individuals expect from local churches suggestions, examples, and space in order to discover specific ways to transcend themselves. Finally, in order to make sure that all these changes are not only proclaimed, but also realized, a concrete strategy of innovation is needed. Sellmann thus proposes a relational ecclesiology, which does not claim to be the focal point of its surroundings but, rather, reaches out in a ‘spatial turn’ to its surroundings.

Not only is the local level changing thoroughly and, hence, in need of reform, but this is also true for the governance of the world church. Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a continuous debate on the role of the papacy, the Curia, and the involvement of the local bishops and local churches in the world church. Major variables have changed in the last fifty years: secularization and dissolution of the Catholic sub-societies in the West, the end of deference towards big institutions and their elites, a shift of the center of gravity of Catholicism towards non-Western churches, increasing internal pluralism, etc. Hence, a new vision on what it means to be a multicultural world church in times of globalization is required and, consequently, a reform of the organizational structures that are needed in order to run such a world church is also needed. In his contribution, Italian/American church historian Massimo Faggioli (Villanova University) starts with noting that the idea of change in the Church has long been under the umbrella of the stark contraposition of two ideal typical understandings of the Church, namely, ‘continuity and reform’ versus ‘discontinuity and rupture’. He argues that, since the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Francis, this contraposition has vanished from the horizon, as it has become clear that the real choice is between reform and restoration. In response to the new challenges that Catholicism is facing today, Pope Francis strives for a church governance in which the idea of
collegial-synodal process has priority over bureaucratic decision, spiritual discernment over magisterial authoritarianism, and open-ended thinking over the obsession about continuity as opposed to discontinuity.

The acknowledgment of the theological and institutional emergencies and the need for a new phase in the governance of the global Catholic Church require a new phase in the reflection of theologians. The attempt to re-inculturate the Catholic Church in a multicultural world must also be a re-inculturation of the Church from an institutional point of view. This is the reason for a new appraisal of the relationship between the potential of Vatican II and the needs of the governance of today’s Church. First, there is the need for more synodality in the Church, which Faggioli regards as one of the long-term ecclesiological trajectories for the Catholic Church. This means that more lay faithful, in particular more women, should be in leadership positions, not only on the level of the universal church, but also on that of the local churches. Second, Faggioli is convinced that the turn to a global and multicultural Catholicism requires a rethinking of the modality of communion in the Church. It is clear that global Catholicism is going to remain a greatly diverse community of communions, all living in different juridical and political situations around the world. Hence, what becomes urgent is the rediscovery of the communio ecclesiarum, the horizontal communion between different local churches, as expression of the communio fidelium at the structural level. This is the ecclesiological side of the quest for a new balance between the necessary unity of the Church and the possible multiplicity and diversity of the local churches. This new emphasis on the communio ecclesiarum is now more important than ever, because it not only regards the turn of the Catholic Church towards the south, but also towards a world that is more urbanized than before. The new reality requires, third, a reform of the central government of the Church, followed by a new pattern of its relations with the geographical peripheries, in particular by strengthening the mid- or continental level of church authority. A consequence of this reform is, fourth, that the relationship between leadership and people in the Church has to be rebalanced. Leadership should not be marked by loyalty to the institutional status quo, but by its prophetic character, while the ‘people’ should be thought of as a theological idea rather than as a homogeneous, socially tangible reality.

Even more than diocesan priests, the number of religious men and women in religious orders and congregations is declining. A reversal of this trend is not to be expected, which prompts the question: Are there examples of religious orders that have proven to re-invent themselves on a much smaller scale and/or have gained a new significance for the faithful and society at large?
Who can better treat these questions than the former Master of the Dominicans, Timothy Radcliffe (Blackfriars, Oxford University)? Although he recognizes the steep decline in the number of male and especially female religious in the West, Radcliffe is not fundamentally pessimistic because the Church has an extraordinary talent for institutional creativity. Yet, at the same time, he realizes that a renaissance of religious life may take forms that we cannot now imagine. Therefore, he asks how religious are responding to the crisis of today. A first element is the need for good leadership: it must focus on vitalizing the mission of the community and try new forms of common life and mission while, at the same time, cherishing what has been done in the past, celebrating its achievements and commemorating the sacrifices that made them possible. A second element is identity: millennials interested in religious life seek a community with a clear identity that resonates with their own sense of identity. The religious identity of the future must be founded on their response to the Lord’s summons, who calls each of them by name. A third element is to move beyond clericalism. Religious institutes need to reaffirm the value of the religious vocation as a distinct calling with its own dignity. Institutes of religious men which have become clericalized need to reclaim again their original identity. Orders whose founders were priests, should reaffirm the importance of the vocation within their fraternities of those not ordained. Instead of asking what the identity of a lay brother is in a clerical order, we must ask what the identity of a priest is in an order of friars, which is to say, brothers. A fourth element is the summons to adventure. Our society, obsessed with health and safety, is risk adverse. Do we have the courage to challenge the timidity of our culture and send our brothers and sisters on missions that may cost them much, even their lives? Religious life in the West will have a future if we dare to ask of the young more than they think that they have to give: “If a religious calling is not heroic, what is the point?” In relation to this, there is the importance of the vows. If the vows are defined so broadly that most Christians could be said to be living them, the distinctive identity of Catholic religious life is blurred. A final element is life in the community: a community will endure and flourish if it is unafraid to accompany its members in hope as they live through and beyond moments of crisis. Otherwise religious life will just be a place to pause in the endless search of somewhere to belong. Furthermore, religious communities need to relate themselves to the wider community, to lay associates in the immediate surroundings and to the Church as one Body of Christ in which all the parts play a significant role.
Taking up the New Challenges

Our ambition with this book is not to present a blueprint of the future Church, nor a comprehensive road map towards that future. Rather, we want to identify some main reform areas that the Catholic Church needs to work on and to formulate some leading ideas that concretize the ways in which this reform can be undertaken. The overall goal of this book is to explore how the Church can remain – in conditions that have fundamentally changed – a vital church in the West. In our view, there are nine central issues that the Church needs to deal with, and we have organized them along three axes, constituting the three parts of the book. Of course, there are more issues that would have been worthwhile to discuss. Moreover, each author presents his or her analysis, ideas, and proposals to address these issues from his or her own socio-cultural and religious perspective. Therefore, it would be preposterous to try to press the contributions into an overall ecclesial futurology. Nevertheless, the general set-up of this book and its individual chapters do point, in our opinion, to two general conclusions: the need for the Church to reform, thereby taking into account that the nature of these reforms is itself a multiple one, and the need to go beyond Vatican II. These two conclusions are related: for the reforms to succeed, one needs to think and to comprehend the Church and the world as they actually are, which means that one has to go beyond Vatican II as the main interpretative scheme.

The Need for Multiple Reforms

All the chapters express a need for reforms in the Church. Of course, the title and set-up of the book – ‘Envisioning Futures’ – are in themselves an invitation to bring up proposals for change. But there is more to it. At present, there is a greater sense of urgency and a positive mood for change in the Church, caused by the fact that the Church in many Western countries has shrunk so much that drastic reorganization – in terms of personnel, ecclesiastical organization, parishes – has become imperative. All the chapters in the book express the conviction that continuing to operate along the lines of the past, let alone trying to restore a supposedly glorious past, are not options any more. There is also an awareness, though not shared by everyone in the Church, that the strategy followed by Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, consisting in redressing the Church from its liberal sliding in the 1960s and 1970s by strengthening the authority of the central magisterium, has reached a dead end. Finally, the election of Pope Francis has unleashed a new enthusiasm for reform.
It is no coincidence that the contributors to this book refer so often to Pope Francis as a wakeup call for reforming and re-centering the Church.

For some within the Church, the resurgence of the mood for reform raises expectations for an upcoming wholesale overhaul of the Church, aimed at completing the reforms that were envisaged in the years of the Council. Yet, the differences with these almost mythic times are great. The first half of the 1960s were the triumphant years of post-war liberal modernity in all Western countries. During this period, all segments of society, including the Church, were engaged in profound reforms, the direction of which seemed pretty clear. Moreover, there was an enormous general enthusiasm about the possibilities to (radically) change society, and this also affected the Council once it got underway. Even then, the proposed changes in the Church took major battles at the Council, although theology, in particular ‘ressourcement’ theology, had already prepared the groundwork for a new, ‘pastoral’ perspective that guided the Council. In comparison to that triumphant period, none of the conditions that made overall change possible are fulfilled today. On the contrary, there is confusion and disagreement about the road the Church should take. There is neither a dominant nor promising alternative theology with enough authority to convince a broad majority of the bishops which reforms are imperative. In the West, the gap between Church and society has become, by now, unbridgeable. Finally, while in the 1960s convening a council proved to be an effective way to create cohesion between the different factions in the Church and to move forward, summoning a new council today would be no guarantee at all for reaching a lasting consensus, but would rather risk tearing the Church apart or to causing fateful paralysis.

Against this background, it is telling that, although the need for reforms is shared by all contributors to this book, none of them has put forward a grand strategy of renewal, just like no one thinks that a full-scale reform of the Church is under way. Instead, multiple pleas for renewal in all walks of life and of the Church are put forward. This is not only a consequence of the lack of a shared vision about the nature and the direction of the reforms that are needed but reflects also a growing awareness that the global character of the Catholic Church does not allow for a ‘one size fits all approach’ of reforms. Instead, this book offers diverse proposals for reforms in and of the Church, formulating multiple, but also piecemeal strategies for reform and procedures for forceful, yet incremental change. Yet the ambition that unites all the contributions to this book is the plea for a non-hostile climate of reforms and experiments, thereby accepting that what proves to be fruitful in one region or branch
of the Church may not work in another one. Moreover, all contributions express the desire to restore the relevance of the Church for today’s world.

Whether the mood for reforms will persist in the years to come is, though, far from sure. It can wither away with the election of the successor(s) of Pope Francis and/or because of a heightening of the polarization between factions in the Church. Behind this prospect lurks the more fundamental question of whether the Catholic Church will be able, in the long run, to generate enough consensus to direct and manage piecemeal and multiple change. The alternative is that the Church will gradually slide into internecine conflict and stagnation due to its incapacity to deal in a fruitful way with the increased internal pluralism combined with the diminished authority of the church hierarchy. The past decades do not bode well in this regard. What gives us hope is that the Church is no exception in comparison to society as a whole in this process of renewal: nowadays, all institutions have to change, if only because they have to respond to the myriad of new challenges they are confronted with in today’s fast-changing society. Moreover, what has also changed in all segments of society is the rising variety of possible responses to these challenges. The traditional opposition between conservative versus liberal is only a scheme that hides a far greater variety. All institutions have thus to invest not only in elaborating their options of how to respond to these new challenges, but above all, in implementing these reforms in everyday life and convincing their adherents or members that these reforms are imperative. In sum, as the example of states and major international organizations that are dependent on their constituency show, problems in responding effectively to the need for change and to implement reforms are not unique for the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, only institutions that succeed in managing change effectively and implementing fitting reforms will thrive.

The Need to Go beyond Vatican II

The discussion about the legacy of Vatican II is extraordinarily wide-ranging and still going on in full vigor. That, in itself, is an astonishing fact and it is also visible in this book. Most chapters refer, often extensively, to the documents of Vatican II and invoke its spirit. These chapters can be read as testimonies of the greatness and the continuing relevance of the Council. Yet, time has moved on, and this requires a different reading of the signs of the times. The beginning of the twenty-first century

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differs profoundly from the early 1960s. It would be wrong to approach the challenges of the Church today primarily with the help of the theological ideas that were laid down in the documents of the Council, as well as to interpret today’s society exclusively through the perspective of Vatican II. Instead, one needs to dare to think and act ‘beyond Vatican II’!

The urgency to envision futures for the Church, starting from the current state of church and society, was our main drive in setting up this book. The changes in society and the Church since the early 1960s are huge. First of all, the Church has changed thoroughly. In many parts of Europe, it has become a minority church with few priests, it has been driven back and/or withdrawn from most secular realms, and it is experiencing a power reversal between the clergy and the faithful. Event religion is on the rise to the detriment of standard religion in the parish. Society, for its part, has changed no less, as becomes apparent from the rise of expressive individualism, self-determination, pluralization, new patterns of partnership and marriage, the decline of traditional institutions and their elites, etc. Hence, hoping for a common future of Church and the world, for a joint march forward towards a bright earthly and heavenly future, led by experienced leaders of these two bodies, a hope that was so admirably expressed in Gaudium et Spes, seems nowadays a bit out-of-touch.

Therefore, we need to rethink both Church and society, as well as their relationships, which have become now more volatile than ever, and reconsider the approaches and strategies that the Church might employ to become relevant again for today’s individuals and societies. That is what we have attempted to do in pointing to a number of pressing challenges the Church is actually confronted with: how to be relevant for individual persons, to devise a fitting offer, to relate the dogmatic content to people, to handle internal pluralism from a theological as well as from an organizational perspective, to think and act globally as well as locally, to revitalize parishes, to renew religious orders and congregations. These challenges are the Church’s top priority and need to be thought through on their own terms. What has been thought about these challenges in the past – if they have been addressed at all – should be taken into account as far as it helps us to deal with the current situation. However, the ingrained tendency to think the present from a past-perspective may serve the purpose of legitimization, but risks hindering an accurate examination of current challenges and the responses they need.

This does not mean that Vatican II – or, in a wider sense, the Catholic tradition – is to be discarded. We noted already that the lasting importance of the Council is confirmed time and again in this book, as many chapters praise its pastoral approach and refer with admiration to its documents. Yet, at the same time, these chapters do not present the Council and its
documents as the final word, but rather as stepping stones that help the contributors to follow their broad and sinuous ways of investigating the new realities, elaborating new vistas, proposing reforms to deal with the challenges of today. The chapters exemplify how one can relate Vatican II as a landmark and indispensable reference point to the Church and society of today. They show that going beyond Vatican II cannot mean simply leaving it behind. Yet, they also show that one cannot start from Vatican II as an encompassing world view in order to interpret, in a second step, the realities of today with the standards of the Council. On the contrary, one needs to start from the current realities and new challenges and reflect on how Vatican II can contribute to the analyses and responses that are needed today! One should not relate Vatican II to the new challenges but, rather, relate the new challenges to Vatican II. This may sound disrespectful to some, but for the analysis of the contemporary world, the light that Vatican II has shed upon the world is to be regarded as a helpful tool, not as the final word. This is also true when one wants to acknowledge that and analyze how the Second Vatican Council — and the wider tradition — has helped to shape the Catholic world of today.

Bibliography


