

# Challenging ecclesiological traditions

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Given the classical theological distinction between the Christian Church as a matter of faith and the visible church as an empirical phenomenon, the article develops an ecclesiology fitting to current global social challenges in times of pronounced global waves of migration. Inspired by the “spatial turn” in contemporary sociology, and guided by a phenomenological methodology, the authors reconstruct a caring praxis in two different cases. The theological interpretation of these cases gives way to a refreshed ecclesiology, leaving behind a static approach and focusing on the church as “Ereignis”.

## Ecclesiology—theological and empirical aspects

For centuries, the Christian church has been defined either externally or internally, that is, either as a geographically defined area or in terms of its members and their religious qualifications. However, in both cases it remains a static entity. This article presents some perspectives on ecclesiology inspired by the “spatial turn” in cultural theory (Sander 2014; Sander, Villadsen and Wyller 2016). “Space” here is seen as that which configures us and where our practices are shaped.

The French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991) is one of the most influential scholars in spatial theory today. Like Michel Foucault, he was preoccupied with “the other spaces”. But Lefebvre focuses more on the “production” of spaces than did Foucault. It was Lefebvre who coined the key concept of “*espace vécu*”, the lived space, as the most significant aspect of how spaces are developed. One cannot study only a given space itself; rather, one also has to study what happens in and around such spaces—and the most significant part of the “production” is the practice itself, the lived space.

Melding that into ecclesiology means leaving behind a static approach and addressing the question of how spaces configure us and which spaces do so better and which not so well. There is an interesting

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and very fruitful connection here between the lived space, on the one hand, and the Protestant ecclesiology underlining the Church as an event (German “Ereignis”<sup>1</sup>) or as a transforming experience. Following the Augsburg Confession (CA) VII (CA 1530/2018), the Church is something that *happens*, that *takes place*. The challenging and significant question is how to research such a practice when God manifests as “word”.

There is currently increasing interest in researching the empirical aspects of ecclesiology. We sympathize with these efforts, but still we believe that the empirical nature of the ecclesiological needs to be further reflected on. The invisible nature of the Church (according to CAVII, the main text for the ecclesiology of the CA) challenges Protestant eccle-

1 The German word “Ereignis” is here translated into English as “event”, which does not cover all aspects of transformation and change implied in the German word.





siology precisely because even this invisibility is embodied. In our view, some practices might perform the invisible in more ecclesiological significant ways than others. This is what we want to discuss in the following sections.

Subsequently, we present some ethnographic research relevant to the “event” part of ecclesiology. The intention here is to discuss how ethnography can contribute to ecclesiology within the context of the Church as a surprising (other) space.

Our overall theological model can best be explained with reference to Paul Tillich’s concept of an “apologetic theology” (Tillich 1953), which is an academic theological endeavor to meet the overall challenges of a certain cultural situation using reflexive intellectual language comprehensive to those outside the Christian church and referring to a common ground. It is our conviction that such an academic theology is best suited to serve the needs of the Christian church.

## The visible and the invisible church

The general empirical-critical task of theology is obviously significant when it comes to reflecting on the nature and reality of the Christian church. Traditionally, ecclesiology reflects the notion of a church of faith versus the visible church, crucial to any Protestant understanding of the matter. The relationship between the *ecclesia invisibilis* and the *ecclesia visibilis* has been a classical dogmatic theme since the time of Augustine.

Traditionally, the *ecclesia invisibilis* has been seen as the “true” church, contrary to the visible church, the institution, the empirical part. Whereas the institution includes all those baptized as members, the true and invisible church knows that not all visible members are truly Christian, despite their baptism or church office. On the other hand, part of the concept of the *ecclesia invisibilis* is that no one knows the persons participating in that realm. The discussion of *ecclesia visibilis/invisibilis* has been quite influential, one that still, in our view, greatly influences some of the discussions on the relations between ecclesiology and ethnography (see below).

Nevertheless, in Lutheran dogma the *visibilis/invisibilis* distinction has never really been the most important one. The rupture with Catholic ecclesiology is one of the core elements of the Reformation. Further, the basis for the distinction between *ecclesia visibilis* and *invisibilis* is misleading. The Church

cannot be perceived and understood simply by continuing the Augustinian paradigm. The Church is not about what we see or what we do not see; rather, the Church is about God transforming lives, and that transformation (“Ereignis”) can take place anywhere, given two conditions: the proclamation of the Gospel and the pouring of the sacraments. This event character in Lutheran ecclesiology is what we consider to have been empirically deepened as a result of the spatial turn and its focus on the transformative nature of the lived space.

This is the perspective adopted in answering the following question:

Can one research these other spaces “*ubi et quando Deo visum est*” (where and when it pleases God)? What is certain is that such research must be empirical, even if the project needs an interpretive component. If one empirically researches spaces other than the classical ones when looking for spaces where the proclamation of the Gospel and a possible pouring of the sacraments occur, then one needs to evaluate different kinds of practices and develop certain criteria. Where and how are the practices *ubi et quando Deo visum est* manifest, i. e. according to God’s pleasure?

This question has, by all accounts, been raised by many theological thinkers in the last few decades. By taking up 20<sup>th</sup> century empirical research on theological ecclesiology, we gain fresh and concrete insights into the general relationship between faith and experience. Jürgen Moltmann was on the right track when he wrote “Keine theologische Ekklesiologie kann davon absehen, dass das Glaubensbekenntnis nicht nur von einer himmlischen Kirche, sondern auch von der Kirche an der nächsten Straßenecke spricht. Und keine empirische Ekklesiologie kann davon absehen, dass die Kirche an der nächsten Straßenecke als Ort des Glaubens zugleich Gegenstand des Glaubens ist” (Moltmann 1975).

## Ethnography and ecclesiology

The Norwegian theologian Harald Hegstad (2013) represents one classical tradition in the discussion of ecclesiology and empirical studies. Hegstad’s position is that the Lutheran Church is the visible church because this is the space where God is proclaimed. Given this position, one should and must research this institutional church empirically. What are the given sociological aspects besides the institution itself that transforms?

The challenge with such a position is, of course, that Hegstad's notion of *ubi et quando Deo visum est* invokes an obviously strong position, but what he does not discuss is whether there can be other spaces where the transforming of God can be experienced.

Recently a group of US, English and Scottish practical theologians (Ward 2017, Scharen 2012 and others) pleaded for a different direction, that is, to develop ecclesiologies especially by means of ethnographic methods and research strategies. These researchers strive to move beyond the rather strict notions of the visible church found in Hegstad's work. But the question is how far this takes us. Titles like *Liquid Ecclesiology* (2017) are interesting, but they also challenging based on the perspective introduced above. Many research initiatives have been carried out within the Action Research Church and Society (ARCS) network. In order to provide a distinguished profile, the book series "Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography" was established.

Ward and colleagues claim that more ethnography is needed to develop an appropriate ecclesiology:

At the heart of our project lies a proposal. Put simply, the proposal is that to understand the church, we should view it as being simultaneously theological and social/cultural. Added to this is the insight that this 'understanding' is itself ecclesial. So the very practice of understanding is both theological and social/cultural (2012, 2).

Ward and Scharen expand on the notion of the visible church presented by Hegstad. They differ from him by (for good reasons) insisting that the church is more than the institution. It exists *extra muros* (outside the walls/physical community) as well. This helps explain concepts like "liquid church". By way of ethnography, Ward and others have introduced a more open approach to understanding religious reality. However, this approach, too, does not relate to the event character of ecclesiology. For this reason, the ethnographical approach is promising and important, though the empirical approach cannot initiate the event discussions contained within CAVII. This is obviously the result of confessional differences, which means that the issue of ecclesiology and ethnography is not only a question of methodology; it is dogmatic and theological as well.

The two authors behind this article have, for their part, also contributed to the issue of developing an empirical approach to ecclesiology. But, different from both Hegstad and Ward, we are interested in a

more phenomenologically inspired empirical-theological approach, which we described in detail in a previous research project (Wyller/Heimbrock 2010).

Characteristic of this approach is an enlarged reconstruction of the Christian praxis linked to everyday ethnography and set in a diverse cultural setting. Thus, our scope goes beyond a narrowly determined "religious" praxis. Crucial to this way of reconstructing empirical reality is the involvement of the human subject, especially the researcher subject, who participates as a human subject in practice. The researcher has two roles: being engaged in praxis as a professional person and being a praxis researcher, assuming a distanced position with respect to this praxis. Thus, it is inevitable in each case that the researcher is an "I".

The two cases we present below are methodologically guided by using basic elements of this kind of a phenomenologically inspired empirical approach to the field. Both cases represent social crises and the related efforts of groups giving aid, all of which is reconstructed from a basic theological standpoint, i.e. the interests of researchers reflecting on their personal and religious involvement in the cases. We are theologically interested in the "lived spaces" in the tradition of Henri Lefebvre (1991). The intention of presenting these two cases is to prompt an important discussion on where and how the event character of the church can be bodily experienced in spaces other than the one focused on by Hegstad and (in part) Ward/Scharen.

This observation leads us to a crucial question: Does taking the event character of the church as a point of departure and including ethnography into the discussions of ecclesiology really lead to the necessary and needed destabilization of classical ecclesiology? In our view, the challenge for ecclesiology in responding to contemporary changes in social reality is that it is rather further leading to and reaching a point where the question of the center and periphery itself is challenged.

## Language training

The first case, presented by Hans-Günter Heimbrock, is about language training with refugees at the University of Frankfurt, done by volunteer students during the winter of 2015/2016. He participated with a group of five students, working in the capacity of supervisor. Even if this case does not directly relate to the institutional church, it is still a



case that is instructively useful in searching for elements of the event character that needs to be part of an empirically founded ecclesiology.

The students in the group were highly motivated, though during the counseling hours they showed growing frustration with how the entire project had been organized, especially with the willingness, or lack thereof, of the refugees to engage with the language training.

The case can be explored more deeply by focusing on one particular student, Linda, and the way the supervising groups responded to her. We followed her thoughts on choosing alternative ways of teaching.

In the beginning, she recounted her utter frustration that, time and again, despite her time-consuming preparation, only 3 of the 15 trainees (mostly of Arabic-speaking ethnic background) gathered in a room adjacent to the large hall really followed the steps she laid out on the blackboard or used the prepared sheet with words and simple pictures. Some were busy playing with their mobile phones, looking up translations of German words into Arabic or Farsi, while others looked as if they did not understand a single word she said; some, obviously illiterate, were trying hard to write the letters on the blackboard. Still others simply looked bored. Linda felt uneasy with her role as a teacher in this situation. She realized that the learning steps presented in the textbook did not function as expected because of the divergent educational backgrounds of the adult pupils.

Uneasy with what she felt to be her obligation to teach them German, in the following lesson she decided just to skip the prescribed path and spontaneously proposed to her companion that they take the whole group of 15 students to visit the famous Senckenberg Natural History Museum in Frankfurt. It seemed to be a good alternative activity. According to her report, most members of the group appreciated this excursion. At the end, one male member of the group even shook hands with her as a way of saying “thank you” and “good-bye”, an unexpected gesture that particularly impressed Linda. Nevertheless, she experienced strong feelings of guilt and was unhappy to have switched to providing mere entertainment. She was at the point of leaving the project.

It took the supervisory group almost an hour to help Linda become aware of her basic inner conflict, between feeling obliged to fulfill her role as language teacher and taking the initiative and abandon this

role for an hour and do other, more acceptable, activities with the refugees that afternoon.

Finally, the group conversation reached a heated point. Tentatively, we asked Linda about her contacts with the group members. One of us supervisors asked: “What do you know about your group members’ experiences in everyday life, sleeping in a gym hall for instance? What do they do when you they go back to the hall?” Linda’s reaction at being criticized was not that of anger, but rather one of complete perplexity. In fact, the whole group of five teachers shared this same perplexity. During a subsequent conversation, the students were invited to think about the refugees’ backgrounds, perhaps their war experiences at home, their escape under the most difficult of circumstances, waiting for months at the border before being allowed into Germany, and now their experiences of daily routines in collective housing, without any privacy, with very little time structure, waiting all day long to obtain the desired documents and a job and better housing, just waiting, waiting, waiting.

The students took up this topic with growing engagement, offered bits of knowledge and fantasies of what they were hoping for, talked about what they had experienced outside the classroom and shared their observations of dealing with privacy in the gym hall, e.g. who came into contact with whom and by what means. In addition, all the students agreed rather quickly that it would be highly desirable for them to know at least a little bit more about their new life circumstances, but they confessed that, so far, they did not. It was the first time within the whole project that we shared experiences about encountering others, both the successful and the less successful experiences.

This case may initially seem to have little or no ecclesiological relevance, because the whole event did not take place in a Christian church nor was it explicitly connected to an activity offered by any congregation or church institution. The question, therefore, is how this praxis might become meaningful from an ecclesiological perspective.

To answer that question, we draw on two points:

First, it is necessary to reflect in more detail on the author (HGH)/researcher’s own involvement in this university group. Even without using any religious vocabulary when participating in the group communication or ever attempting to give a theological interpretation of the students’ experiences, this does not mean that the whole event is not theologically interesting. Any group process going on

within a set of meetings held for supervisory purposes includes much more than a particular semantic, much more than this or that interpretive framework. This is where a supervisor connects his or her verbal messages, including habits, modes of perceiving the other group members, evoking (or stopping) a certain atmosphere, particular ways of posing questions, making interjections or giving silent gazes. The task is to reconstruct the quality of interactions and interventions taking place in such a counseling group from a theological perspective.

To identify the event character in a given situation, to describe or evaluate a helping praxis from a theological perspective, it is not sufficient to merely check the “Christian” verbal content of dialogues held during the counseling sessions. Nor is it sufficient to check whether this praxis is institutionally connected to a church or congregation, whether the actors are acting upon an explicit Christian order or ministerial praxis. What is necessary is to focus on the praxis of the human subjects involved and to also reflect on the distance or relationship to the institutional church in the area. Is the praxis within the context of the institutional church, or is it absolutely disconnected? In the latter situation, the event character can still be convincing, but one needs to judge carefully *how* the event character can be perceived as an event of God’s transformation or an event of all other kinds of transformations.

Despite these reflections, further reflection on the case of Linda and the discussions that followed during the supervisory meeting should contemplate a basic hermeneutical task on a theoretical level: to read or translate the (interactive) praxis of a human subject in light of theological and ecclesiological ideals, norms and values.

The South African theologian D. Louw recently gave this description: “the academic and theological endeavor is to develop appropriate constructs and conceptual designs that are adequate to interpret the reality of existential and cultural contexts, but at the same time, to be fit and appropriate to link the human quest for meaning to the spiritual realm of life and the content of the Christian faith” (Louw 2010, 69). We share this approach to the case of Linda. The role of the researcher subject should therefore also be involved in the further interpretation of such an endeavor. This means that the event character cannot be convincingly narrated without the exposure of the subject narrating the transformation.

As stated above, the case of Linda shows a situation where the institutional church is totally decen-

tered from the situation. Instead of church activities, practices are put into place that aim to improve the quality of life for people who are lack aspects of it. In a traditional sense, there seems to be no “proclamation of the Gospel or distribution of the sacraments” here. What we find instead is a praxis of life enacting certain core values of the church as event: sharing, connecting, encouraging, and so forth. This is done by establishing a new space, a space of sharing during the museum visit, a space of less discipline and more human recognition. Guided by Lefebvre’s concept of “lived space”, one could say: In the case of Linda, a practice takes place when the institutional church becomes decentered to the extent that new and other subjects can enter in. The case suggests that leaving room for and giving room to others appeals to the *notae ecclesiae* of a decentering church.

In summary, the case of Linda, with all its obvious challenges, displays important criteria that need to be part of the church as event: the necessary involvement of the researcher subject, the more detailed and embodied presence of how participants interact and the decentering of the institutional church. These criteria are confirmed and developed in the second case.

## Cavern/studio at Lampedusa

The second case, presented by Trygve Wyller, is from the Italian island of Lampedusa. Compared with the previous case, this brief ethnography is not quite as disconnected from an ecclesial context. Still, it has many of the same characteristics of the first case: the involvement of the researcher, the embodied practice, and the decentering—but not absent—institutional church. The case was compiled during a week’s stay on the island and facilitated by the church-driven group mentioned in the case presentation.

It is a very moving experience to walk and drive along the iconic island of Lampedusa, where so many people have drowned just beyond the shoreline and beaches, especially on a day so bright and innocent. The island belongs to Italy and is in this sense part of Europe, but it is in one of the most remote parts of Europe. The distance south to Libya is shorter than to mainland Italy. For many years, Lampedusa has been one of the main landing sites for migrants from North Africa. They come in small boats, and many of them drown while trying to cross the Mediterranean. When the present Pope



Francis was elected, he made his first, very symbolic, visit to Lampedusa.

I visited the island for a short period of time last year, invited by a religious organization called Mediterranean Hope. This organization is run by Catholics and Protestants together, with the goal being to facilitate, improve and assist as well as to inform and do advocacy.

At the very top of the island, there is a deep narrow valley among the rocks. If you walk up to the top and look down, you see the reception center at the bottom. It is closed off by fences, police and highly visible military guards. It is a long way down from the top to the houses below, so you can sit there watching small people walking, children playing and cars moving close to the reception center. The sight is akin to a policed space.

The local Catholic church is present and visible in the small city center. Inside the church building, one finds very symbolic artifacts connected to migration. There is a sculpture of a small boat with people hanging on to it from the outside, a gift to the church from the Pope when he visited. Inside the church building, there are all kinds of refugee symbols. This is a preoccupied, but still very traditionally centered, church.

Then, on the other side of town, we find another kind of church. One of the organizations present is Mediterranean Hope, an organization co-chaired by the Protestant Chiesa Valdese and the Catholic Sant'Egidio. They do advocacy and information work and assist when the boats come into the harbor at night full of exhausted people. One of the project workers invited the second researcher one afternoon to a music-recording event in a dark basement space near Lampedusa's eastern harbor. One of the goals of the organization is to empower those migrants who can leave the reception center for a few hours during the daytime. One opportunity available to them is music recording. Three musicians from the island and musicians from other European countries as well constructed a real, professional recording studio in a basement room and then invited interested migrants to sing and tape their singing, with two goals in mind: to provide a moment of experiencing another life, an outside life, an alternative home life, and the possibility to sing as an individual, not just as a fenced-in migrant.

This very day two young migrants from two different North African countries came to the basement room. One of them especially was quite good; he could rap, and so he rapped some songs in his

native language, taking advice and critiques from the musicians in the project. The lyrics were not very impressive, but the tune and the embodied presence were all the more impressive. Being in this basement room means participating in all the moments of sensing, hearing, smelling and seeing a lifeworld of shared sensibilities. One cannot think of the basement without this embodied sensibility becoming the central part of the narrative.

Interpreting the second case in line with our methodological approach demands further reflection on the subjects' involvement as well as developing an understanding of the Church as a particular space.

When I climbed the rocks to better see the reception center below, I saw a place, but I observed it from the outside, unable to enter it at all. Moreover, this is the goal and the intention of the center: it is there to fence them out and not to let me in. It is colonial "untouchable" space, fencing others away from all sensibility, from the noises, from the smells and from the sights. I can hardly see anything, hardly hear anything, and I smell nothing. In sum, the embodied touching is out of reach. This is Lampedusa's reception center, and it has intentionally been designed in such a way. Colonialism persists: the other (the refugee) is a fetish, because you are not supposed to touch him/her. It is a center, but it looks like a camp, and it is a camp—the state of exception—in the Agambian sense (Agamben 2007).

To discover the practice at Lampedusa as a practice of a church requires competence and context. Like everywhere in Italy, there is also much visible religion around, but the question is whether this visibility is the only face of religion on this island.

The long trip into the cavern was made possible because of the Valdensian Church, travelling to Lampedusa on invitation from Mediterranean Hope and including a long chain of church-related events and persons. In this way, the context seems quite similar to the one in the first case. It involved persons very much connected to churches, people trained and experienced in developing an atmosphere of "in the image of God", sharing the joy and seriousness and—even more significantly—the senses: tasting, listening, seeing (barely), touching, both being present and participating in the few minutes of melancholic Eritrean rapping. Above all, the narrative developed through the sense of the participant me. To call the researcher an observer, even a participating observer, would not completely describe what happened.

These cases are not just randomly chosen bits of reality. We think they provoke us to re-read ecclesiology and its basic constituents. The famous “*notae ecclesiae*” (unity, holiness, catholicity) deserve a new interpretation, one more fitting to an enlarged reconstruction of Christian praxis linked methodically to everyday ethnography and including diverse cultural settings.

In other words, in both cases there are church-related (or relevant) experiences or churches themselves that facilitate solidarity work among the locals, who have contributed to competence building. The dilemma then still remains: while it is one thing to facilitate, it is another thing entirely to actually do it, to practice it, to be a church.

Crucial to this way of reconstructing empirical reality is the involvement of the human subject, especially the researcher subject participating as a human subject in practice. Taking up this point has a major theological and ecclesiological impact. In a Lutheran context, the church is a praxis formatted by connectivity. Church means being connected, lifted into a God-connection and sharing other people’s lives, you with them, they with you. Since connectedness is such a fundamental part of what the church is about, visible and invisible, the researcher subject’s own experiences of being connected and disconnected belong to the research itself and cannot be set aside. On the contrary, connectivity can represent what the church as event is all about.

One might say that the latter case shows a stronger presence of the criteria mentioned in the Frankfurt case. The church that facilitates is at the same time a church that decenters in order to let the rapping refugee perform, much as it initiates language training to improve itself by taking its mission and ministry in a fruitful direction. It includes voice, sound, eyes, sweating skin, coping and practicing spaces different from the cathedral churches, yet still spaces of the lived, embodied and decentered church. The same criteria were also present in Frankfurt, but less visible than in Lampedusa. Though none of the cases may seem ecclesologically irrelevant, in both cases we are tracing the church as “*Ereignis*” on different levels.

## The decentered church

We started our paper by addressing the problem of how ecclesiology might be connected with the theological and the empirical.

Based on the cases and the discussions above, we are convinced that new ecclesiological interpretations force us to discuss and interpret what spatial perspectives mean for ecclesiology. However, taking up the “spatial turn” from the humanities is done not only to look at a particular space as a secondary object “out there” for theological reflection. It requires following a theoretical shift, taking up spatiality not as a pure fact to be found outside in reality, but as a qualitative description done by theoretical operation, or as a socially and culturally rooted category.

Spatial ecclesiology includes an understanding of space as lived space, experienced by embodied human subjects, involved in meaning making and connected by power relations. The spatial approach recognizes that the embodied relationship between the language teacher, the instructor and the group is just one spatial presence. Persons are related to each other through their bodies, their senses and their togetherness. The same goes for the cavern/studio, which is an evident space in the sense of a room/place. However, it is more than a place; it is a space because of the relations of all kinds of awareness presented above ground and all the relations developing inside the specific room/place. In spatial theory (Lefebvre, Foucault), there can be no doubt that both spaces are lived spaces (Lefebvre), or heterotopic spaces (Foucault). Still, despite its significance, this lived space is not converted into ecclesiologies all by itself.

What one can say is that decentering—in the way we apply it here—is not something *done* to the Church by non-Christian society. Perceived from a Lutheran ecclesiological point of view, decentering is an inherent and organic activity of the Church itself. Paradoxically, the concept of a “decentered church” means a church where what we could call the embodied life of everyday people the subject and where the church hierarchy only has one responsibility: to facilitate the embodied everyday life of the people, much as in the two cases presented above. We learn from the two cases that decentering and ecclesigenesis are two parallel movements. From this standpoint, we should once again take up Moltmann’s interpretation of the “*Strassenkirche*” (street church) as the believed church.

Linking the Christian Church as “*Ereignis*” to the embodied lives of people and human praxis might cause the Church to finally be perceived as a human effort. For Protestant theology, it has always been essential to perceive the Church as “*creatura verbi*”, based not upon human activity, but on



God's ongoing initiative. The church of faith means that God in Christ decenters in order to put humans at the center. Therefore, there is neither a single center nor a single periphery. Dissolving this binary situation and reconstructing it with spatial theory and putting its focus on the "Ereignis" of the lived space are decisive for the further discussion of ecclesiology and ethnography. There is also not one (church) space that dissolves in order to spatialize the life world of the others. The church as event is the dissolving and embodied entity at the same time. Further research on this within the context of ethnography and ecclesiology is an important future task.

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