

*Cognitive and Aesthetic Approaches to Theology  
and The Nature and Mission of the Church*

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### Introduction

The Faith and Order paper, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (2005) is a part of an on-going process towards a 'Common Statement' on the doctrine of the Church. As such the text sets out such areas where agreement is already possible and leaves areas of on-going discussion in 'shaded boxes'. What is of particular interest to me is the way in which the text brings together what might be seen as different approaches to the statement of doctrine; it might indeed be argued that there are different genres of text, sometimes within the same paragraph. One way in which to name this difference might be to draw upon the distinction between theory and practice or between theory and experience. What interests me in particular is whether this method of expressing ecumenical doctrinal agreement might be used explicitly in seeking a resolution of Church-dividing issues.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. There are examples of this methodology in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) particularly in relation to different church practices and experiences associated with the celebration of Baptism and Eucharist and the exercise of Ministry. However in *TNMC* the method is pursued in the main body of the text as well as in the shaded boxes. Another way of naming these differences might be to argue that some sentences are written from a more rational or 'objective' stance which might be labelled 'cognitive', while others are written from a more 'subjective' stance on the basis of reflection on practice and experience.<sup>1</sup> This latter approach might also be understood in terms of 'aesthetic response'. Schleiermacher in his appeal to the human experiences of 'God-consciousness' and feelings of 'absolute dependence' offers a modern paradigm for understanding 'aesthetic response'.<sup>2</sup> This also echoes John Wesley's appeal to 'experience', as a fourth element to be set alongside Scripture, Tradition and Reason in the doing of theology. The acceptance of 'experience' as a core element in the production of doctrinal understanding also reminds us that the reception of 'Revelation' is experiential, as well as the lived 'Tradition' of the Church. The more 'objective' stance produces a written style which makes assertions without direct appeal to experience, while the more 'subjective' stance produces a written style which argues from experience. The former I will refer to as 'cognitive' claims and the latter as 'aesthetic' claims. I will apply this framework to the task of analysing and responding to *TNMC*. I am particularly interested to discern how an aesthetic approach to understandings of the Church is expressed in *TNMC*; i.e. how an appeal to experience is used to describe the Church, its reality, its members and its praxis.

### Analysis of the text

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<sup>1</sup> See: Lindbeck, G. *The Nature of Doctrine*, London: SPCK, 1984, pp. 16-17. George Lindbeck sets out a framework for understanding doctrinal statements or claims. He suggests three ways in which doctrinal statements can be received: Cognitive – Experiential-Expressive (aesthetic) – Synthetic. Alister McGrath in *The Genesis of Doctrine*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, chapter 2, offers a critique of this understanding.

<sup>2</sup> See: Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1893; and *The Christian Faith*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928

Paragraph 9 begins by making a series of ‘cognitive’ claims, and then turns to the experience of being ‘called and sent’, which brings to a series of cognitive claims an implicit aesthetic dimension to the statement:

9. The Church is thus the creature of God’s Word and of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God, is God’s gift and cannot exist by and for itself. Of its very nature it is missionary, called and sent to serve, as an instrument of the Word and the Spirit, as a witness to the Kingdom of God.

In paragraph 10 we find a similar combination of claims which again is premised on an aesthetic reception of experience.

10. Thus the Church is the creature of God’s Word (*creatura Verbi*), the Gospel, which, as a living voice, creates and nourishes the Church throughout the ages. This divine Word is witnessed to and heard through Scripture. Incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Word is testified to by the Church and proclaimed in preaching, in Sacraments, and in service.

A similar approach is to be found in paragraph 12, but in this instance the reception of experience is brought to the foreground, and so an aesthetic understanding of ‘apostolicity’ is set before us, which may be able to overcome the polarisation of understandings, which might be found in a more cognitive form of describing ‘apostolicity’.

12. This word of God is made known to us through the Gospel primarily and normatively borne witness to by the apostles (cf. Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14), making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth expressed in faith and life throughout the ages.

In paragraph 15 we find a set of claims rooted in [interpreted] experience, which are used to create an aesthetic ground for a cognitive claim about ‘tradition’. This again has the potential to overcome historic disagreements concerning the notion (and status?) of ‘tradition’.

15. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the earliest communities guides the followers of Jesus in each time and each place as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel. This is what is understood by the living tradition of the Church.

Paragraph 32 is posited solely on the experience of various activities predicated of the Church community and its members, and on this basis the claim for the ‘communion’ of the Church is made, again avoiding any problems associated with claims made on the basis of a cognitive approach.

32. Visible and tangible signs of the new life of communion are expressed in receiving and sharing the faith of the apostles; breaking and sharing the Eucharistic bread; praying with and for one another and for the needs of the world; serving one another in love; participating in each other’s joys and sorrows; giving material aid; proclaiming and witnessing to the good news in mission and working together for justice and peace. The communion of the Church consists not of independent individuals but of persons in community, all of whom contribute to its flourishing.

In paragraph 44 a similar approach may be discerned, but here the second half is cognitive. But the cognitive claim is made on the basis of a set of aesthetic claims which partially form the basis for making the cognitive claim. Here there is perhaps a clear example (recognition?) of the subtle play in theological reflection and statement between the aesthetic and cognitive.

44. Aware of God's saving presence in the world, the Church already praises and glorifies the Triune God through worship and discipleship, and serves God's plan. Yet the Church does so not only for itself, but rather renders praise and thanks on behalf of all peoples for God's grace and the forgiveness of sins.

Paragraph 49 is a further example of a more nuanced set of claims in which the aesthetic root of various claims is crafted into a cognitive formula: thus, the experience of faith, hope and love, of the Holy Spirit, and being in a personal relationship with God are brought together to assert the sophisticated claim of a 'realise eschatology'.

49. On the one hand, the Church already participates in the communion of God, in faith, hope, love, and glorification of God's name, and lives as a communion of redeemed persons. Because of the presence of the Spirit and of the Word of God, the Church - as *Creatura Verbi* and *Creatura Spiritus* (cf. §10ff.), as the communion of all believers held in personal relationship with God by God himself (cf. §11), as the people of God (cf. §§19-20) - is already the eschatological community God wills.

The claims of paragraph 59 are premised on a combination of cognitive propositions, and core experiences, viz. distorted relationships, repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration, along with 'a genuine enjoyment of new life'. This combination of cognitive claims and aesthetic experience and response allows for a number of different claims to be made about the nature of the Church, and of 'communion'. Here this approach allows the perspectives of different ecclesial traditions to be expressed alongside one another without giving a full account of those differences, because the agreement is premised on an aesthetic rather than cognitive description of reality.

59. There remains by virtue of creation a natural bond between human beings and between humanity and creation. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). The new life of communion builds upon and transforms, but never wholly replaces, what was first given in creation; within history, it never completely overcomes the distortions of the relationship between human beings caused by sin. Sharing in Christ is often restricted and only partially realised. The new life therefore entails the constant need for repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration. It belongs to the essence of fellowship with God that the members of Christ's body pray day after day "Forgive us our sins" (Lk 11:4; cf. Mt 6:12). But the Father cleanses us from our sins in the blood of his son Jesus and, if we acknowledge our sins, we will be forgiven (cf. 1 Jn 1:7-10). Nonetheless, there is a genuine enjoyment of new life here and now and a confident anticipation of sharing in the fullness of communion in the life to come.

In this final example (paragraph 114) the practice of discipleship is predicated again on a combination of cognitive theorisation and experiential practice. The aesthetic quality of informed choice and lived reality is brought together with a cognitive view of claims about authentic humanity. This in turn leads to claims being made about the nature and quality of common life in the Church. Here again church dividing notions are avoided through a subtle combination of aesthetic / experience based claims and cognitive reasoning.

114. The ethics of Christians as disciples relate both to the Church and to the world. They are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God's will within the various circumstances of time and place. The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Christians both can and should join together with the adherents of other religions, as well as with all persons of good will, in order to promote not only those personal moral choices which they believe essential to the authentic realization of the human person, but also the social goods of justice, peace and the protection of the environment. Thus Christian discipleship requires believers to give serious consideration to the complex ethical questions that touch their personal lives

and the public domain of social policy, and to translate their reflections into action. A Church that would want to be invisible would no longer be a church of disciples.

The explicit recognition of the method(s) used in *TNMC* may assist both in the reception of the document as well as taking the process forward to another 'stage'. It may also assist the assessment of other dialogue documents as well as the process of dialogue itself and the crafting of ecumenical statements. The method(s) may also assist in the process of re-examining the issues set out in the shaded boxes of the text of *TNMC*.

The first box (between 13 and 14) highlights the issue of how aesthetic response is to be interpreted and received; indeed it clearly demonstrates that aesthetic experience requires to be interpreted: the question that emerges concerns how cognitive processes are applied to aesthetic experience and response (which may be rooted in axiomatic claims). The box is concluded with the statement:

It remains for future theological work to find out whether these differences are real disagreements or mere differences in emphasis that can be reconciled with each other.
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Here the core of the question of the interpretation of aesthetic experience is exposed. This suggests that despite the successful use of aesthetic experience and claims, the place of cognitive claims is not easily set aside. This in turn raises the question of how such cognitive claims are constructed in the first instance, and whether it is possible to discern an aesthetic root within them; or whether such claims are predicated simply on 'reason'. The claim that such claims are rooted in 'revelation' does not mean that they are separated from 'experience' indeed all revelation is surely rooted in an experience of some kind, at some stage (in the past?). The following two boxes (between 48 and 49; and between 56 and 57) both raise similar issues concerning the reception and interpretation of experience: of 'sacrament' in the first instance and 'sin' in the second. Again differences may be seen in terms of 'emphasis', however the question of whether such difference is church-dividing again rests on issues surrounding the interpretation of experience.

The interpretation of the 'raw data' of 'revelation' and 'lived experience' by ecclesial communities remains at the heart of the ecumenical project. The reconciliation of different traditions of interpretation and of exposition of those traditions in relation to the calling of the Church 'to teach' remains a core task. Might the interrogation of the reception and understanding of aesthetic experience and response enable this process of reconciliation to taken forward?

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Chichester, January 2009